

Ray Berry and his wife Sonja have been associated with the Vedanta Society of New York since the 1960s. Later, the family resided adjacent to the Olema, CA Vedanta retreat, and Ray was also a regular visitor at the Trabuco, CA monastery. He is the author of *The Spiritual Athlete: A Primer for the Inner Life*.

Although I have little to offer, what I *do* remember is Swami Aseshananda sitting very quietly (almost in a corner as it were) at the Vedanta Society of New York in the 60's visiting Swami Pavitrananda with other swamis.

When Swami Aseshananda came to NYC for Pavitrananda's memorial service (November 1977), I went with a friend, Stanley Quinn, to pick Swami up at the airport. Stanley asked me how we would recognize Swami A. I just laughed.

Sure enough there was no problem! Here comes this frumpy looking old man in an overcoat, winter cap with the "flaps down," curly hair billowing out beneath the cap, and a suitcase tied up with a rope, so it wouldn't pop open.

When we arrived at the center, Swami Tathagatananda pushed me up the stairs behind Swami Aseshananda and told me to "help" him get settled and show him around Swami Pavitrananda's room. I knew it well since I was Swami Pavitrananda's sevak (personal attendant) for many years.

On the way to the airport, we were all packed into our old Dodge Dart. I was up front with Swami A next to me, in the middle Swami T riding shotgun, and in back were Pr.Dhyana-prana, now in Hollywood convent, and 3 of my kids. As we neared JFK airport, we had a flat tire (having hit an horrendous pothole at high speed a few miles back which filled the whole car with "dust"). I pulled over on the grass (we were running very late) and started barking orders to my kids about jacking up the car, etc. and particularly told Tathagatananda to stay put and *not* get out. You must picture that this was an Indianapolis 500- style tire change as we were very late and Dhyana-prana also had to catch a flight.**

Well as we got the car jacked up very high, Tathagatananda opens the front door to get out. Boy did I blast him (we've always been good friends). Tire changed, Dhyana-prana pushed out of the car and if I remember rightly she had to lug her suitcase a long way to get to her terminal. Then we pull up in front of Swami A's terminal, and as far as I remember he didn't even look back. And of course, not a peep out of him the whole time!

In 1995, perhaps after visiting my dear friend Swami Lokeshwarananda in Vancouver, my wife and I stopped by the Portland center. Swami Aseshananda was blind by then, and some of the folks there were on "edge" as it were. But Swami came downstairs, and greeted Sonja and me with a thunderous "Welcome, welcome!" There seemed to be a sigh of relief from the assembled "devotees." [editorial note: When asked about the reason for this sigh of relief, the contributor explained that Swami Aseshananda was noted for blasting people.]

** Dhyana-prana recalled this event and wrote: "When we got to the airport Ray told me he would be right back to take me to my terminal as they went off with Swami Aseshananda. We were parked across from the departing flights in some kind of no-man's land. Since I was anxious to get to my flight on time I walked across the divider and on to my terminal. As I remember it was not too far across the way. I was very grateful to Ray for the memorable trip to the airport with two holy men."

Fontaine Epler (Santi), a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda, spent five weeks at Belur Math during the presidency of His Holiness Shrimat Swami Vireswaranandaji, lived and worked at the Ganges monastery for two and one-half years during the lifetime of Swami Bhashyananda, and is an Associate of the Episcopal Order of St. Anne.

After Swami Pavitrananda died, and before Jean MacPhail [later "Gayatri-prana"] left NYC for San Francisco, she came to the Sarada Ashrama in Marshfield, Mass., for a retreat with my guru, Swami Sarvagatananda (head of both the Boston and Providence centers). There she told me about how inspiring Swami A[seshananda] was at Swami P[avitrananda]'s memorial service [see Gayatri-prana's reminiscence], creating a strong desire on my part to have his darshan, which was arranged with him for Easter week in 1980.

Before I left, a gentleman asked me to deliver a letter to a gentleman who attended the Portland Center. As soon as I go there, I approached a bramachari, to give it to the addressee; but he backed away from it/me in obvious alarm. Very shortly Swami A approached me and demanded to know why I'd spoken to the bramachari; and I told him about the letter. He said, "Give it to Mr. Bush. He will do the needful." (I loved his Britishisms so much!) And I had no preparation for the fact that bramacharis were off limits, because the bramacharis at the Boston Center were the very ones to "do the needful" there).

At the first vesper worship I attended in the shrine, it seemed odd to hear someone mowing the lawn just outside while we were to be meditating. And even odder that someone came into the darkened room wearing a khaki-colored chaddar, whose shape

made me think of “the hunchback of Notre Dame,” approached the altar, and performed worship on his knees—crawling on his knees—while his chaddar dragged 6 feet (it seemed) behind him on the floor, as he moved back and forth before the altar in this grotesque fashion.

I could hear the flowers on the altar plop, plop, as he swept them onto the floor; and then he *threw* fresh flowers at the images on the altar. When he finished everything and left the room, what I saw took my breath away: the flowers were set beautifully in perfect order, and there was a luminous glow from the scene which had nothing to do with lit candles.

Only then did I know that *that* was Swami A. The only other pujari who created such an atmosphere that I could actually *see* the *light* created, by the end of a puja, was Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji Maharaj. (And I have seen at least a half a dozen).¹ After I went home, I went to a fabric store and bought a length of khaki fabric to use for a chaddar, which I used for many years.

“Holy Mother’s Cat” was in residence when I was there. Swami A formally introduced me to it as “a *very* fine cat.” When we met for class Swami would tell someone to get the cat and bring it into the room before he would start the class. Now this cat looked like a beat-up alley cat to me, and I asked Vera Edwards [a devotee] (during the time it took to locate the cat and bring it into the room), “What are the merits of that cat?” And she said, “Oh, it’s not by our *merits* we are here; it’s that Swami has given us his protection.”²

When we were getting ready for the Easter puja, several women and I were told on Saturday to make a garland, each, for one of the shrine pictures he planned to set up for the puja. I was assigned to the picture of Jesus, which was small (maybe 8” x 11”?), while that of Ramakrishna was quite large (18” x 24”?). I chose Magnolia blossoms for the yard for mine, and strung them on a string to approximate the size of that picture.

On Easter, the garlands were all placed each in a heap, separately, on a tray, for Swami to dress each picture during the worship. But he took mine and put it on Ramakrishna’s picture! It was like a necklace! The long daisy chain the woman made for Ramakrishna he put on Jesus in such a way that its surplus was bunched up at the bottom of that image. I was so happy! You see, I had been thinking of Ramakrishna the whole time I made my garland.

I never asked Swami a single question, or requested an interview; but before the week was up, he told me to join him privately once. There was very little talk. He asked me a question or two, I think; but then he sat in silence, after which he said, “I will give you the dust of Holy Mother’s feet,” and led me into the shrine pantry. I knelt down and he touched my head with the picture he had there. I didn’t feel any other sensation; but I was deeply moved and honored, because I’d come to believe that picture to be the

powerhouse of the entire center, as I'd seen that Swami kept his wallet and keys in front of it, and was told that he always left them there when he was in the Center.

I was carrying in my heart a problem at the time. I had a teenage daughter (Esther)³ and I was worried that I was not "a good mother" to her. I was divorced, and we were living together. I didn't visit Swami A to deal with that worry, and it didn't occur to me to mention it to him, but on the flight home (to Portland, Maine) I had the conviction that *I was a "good mother,"* a conviction that has never left me from that moment to this. And I knew it was Swami's gift to me.

¹*more* than a dozen pujaris.

²"his protection" I'm not sure she used exactly those two words; but that was the idea.

³also a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda who gave her the name Sumana.

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